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ABSTRACT

Noting that one of the leading indicators of progress toward the goal of all children being ready for the first grade is the number of at-risk children with access to high-quality prekindergarten programs, this report presents information on the efforts of states in the southern United States to achieve that goal. The report notes that during the 2002-2003 school year, state-supported prekindergarten programs in the south, excluding Florida, served more than 325,000 children 3 and 4 years old, with state prekindergarten programs and Head Start combined serving 100,000 more than the number of 4-year-olds living in poverty in the southern states. The use of poverty as a criterion for counting at-risk children is discussed. The report includes profiles of state prekindergarten programs in Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Information presented for each program includes the year established, target population, 2002-2003 funding, program hours, number of children served, eligible providers, and administering agency. The report notes that Mississippi has no state prekindergarten program but has the largest percentage of eligible children served by Head Start of any state. The report concludes by noting that although the southern states are facing budgetary pressures as is the rest of the nation, none of the 15 states with programs has experienced a significant reduction in funding. (KB)

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State-supported Prekindergarten in the SREB Region:

Growing in Hard Times

2003

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The total number of at-risk 4-year-olds served by state prekindergarten programs or Head Start in the SREB region in 2002-2003 exceeds the number of 4-year-olds living in poverty by more than 100,000.

In 12 SREB states, the number of 4-year-olds served by state prekindergarten programs or Head Start exceeds the number of 4-year-olds living in poverty.

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State-supported Prekindergarten in the SREB Region:

Growing in Hard Times

The first of the 12 SREB ***Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead*** is for all children to be ready for the first grade. One of the leading indicators of progress toward that goal is the number of at-risk children with access to high-quality prekindergarten programs. Across the region, state efforts to achieve that goal have been impressive.

- During the 2002-2003 school year, state-supported prekindergarten programs in the SREB region served more than 325,000 3- and 4-year-old children. That number does not include children served by state-funded prekindergarten in Florida because data for 2002-2003 are not available. (See page 7.)
- At least 220,000 of the children served by state prekindergarten programs are at-risk 4-year-olds.
- State prekindergarten programs and Head Start combined serve more than 360,000 at-risk 4-year-olds, 100,000 more than the number of 4-year-olds living in poverty in the SREB states.

Poverty has been used as the criterion for counting at-risk children because comparable data are available for every state, because poverty is the eligibility standard for Head Start, and because research shows that poverty is the leading predictor of children's risk of failure in school. The number of at-risk children served by state prekindergarten programs can exceed the number in poverty, however, because some states define "at-risk" more broadly than just poverty status. **Arkansas,** for example, includes low birth-weight, having a teenage mother and/or having parents with a low education level among its at-risk indicators. **Maryland, South Carolina** and **Texas** consider children for whom English is a second language to be at-risk.

This report was prepared by David R. Denton, SREB director of school readiness and reading.

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The poverty figures used here are from the 2000 census. Given the difficult economic conditions in the United States, subsequent to 2000, the actual number of children living in poverty in 2003 may be higher than the 2000 figure.

While not every SREB state can claim that all children in poverty are served by either a state prekindergarten program or Head Start, the number that can is impressive.

- Twelve SREB states have more at-risk 4-year-olds enrolled in a state prekindergarten program or Head Start than they have 4-year-old children in poverty: **Arkansas, Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia** and **West Virginia.**
- In **North Carolina,** the total number of at-risk 4-year-olds served is 95 percent of the number in poverty.
- In both **Alabama** and **Tennessee,** the number served is nearly 70 percent of the number in poverty.
- The state prekindergarten programs in **Texas** and **Georgia** are the first- and fourth-largest in the United States in total numbers of children served.

Florida is not included among the states listed above because data for state-funded prekindergarten programs are not available. Counting only Head Start, the figure for **Florida** would be 48 percent, but the number of children served in state-funded prekindergarten programs undoubtedly would raise the percentage served substantially — not only for the state but for the region as a whole.

The graph on page 3 compares the number of 4-year-old children served in each state with the number of 4-year-olds living in poverty.

The state prekindergarten programs described in the state profiles in this report include new and expanded prekindergarten initiatives in **Alabama, Louisiana, North Carolina** and **West Virginia.** Among established programs, **Oklahoma** led the overall growth with an increase in enrollment of 38 percent — almost 8,000 children — between 1999-2000 and 2002-2003. **Mississippi** currently has no state prekindergarten program but has the largest percentage of eligible children served by Head Start of any state.

The funding figures presented in this report are the amounts allocated directly to the programs by the states. In several cases, these funds include federal grant funds provided for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) under the reformed federal welfare system. Among the acceptable uses of these funds are programs designed to meet the child-care needs of needy families. The amount of these funds available from year to year can vary substantially, however.

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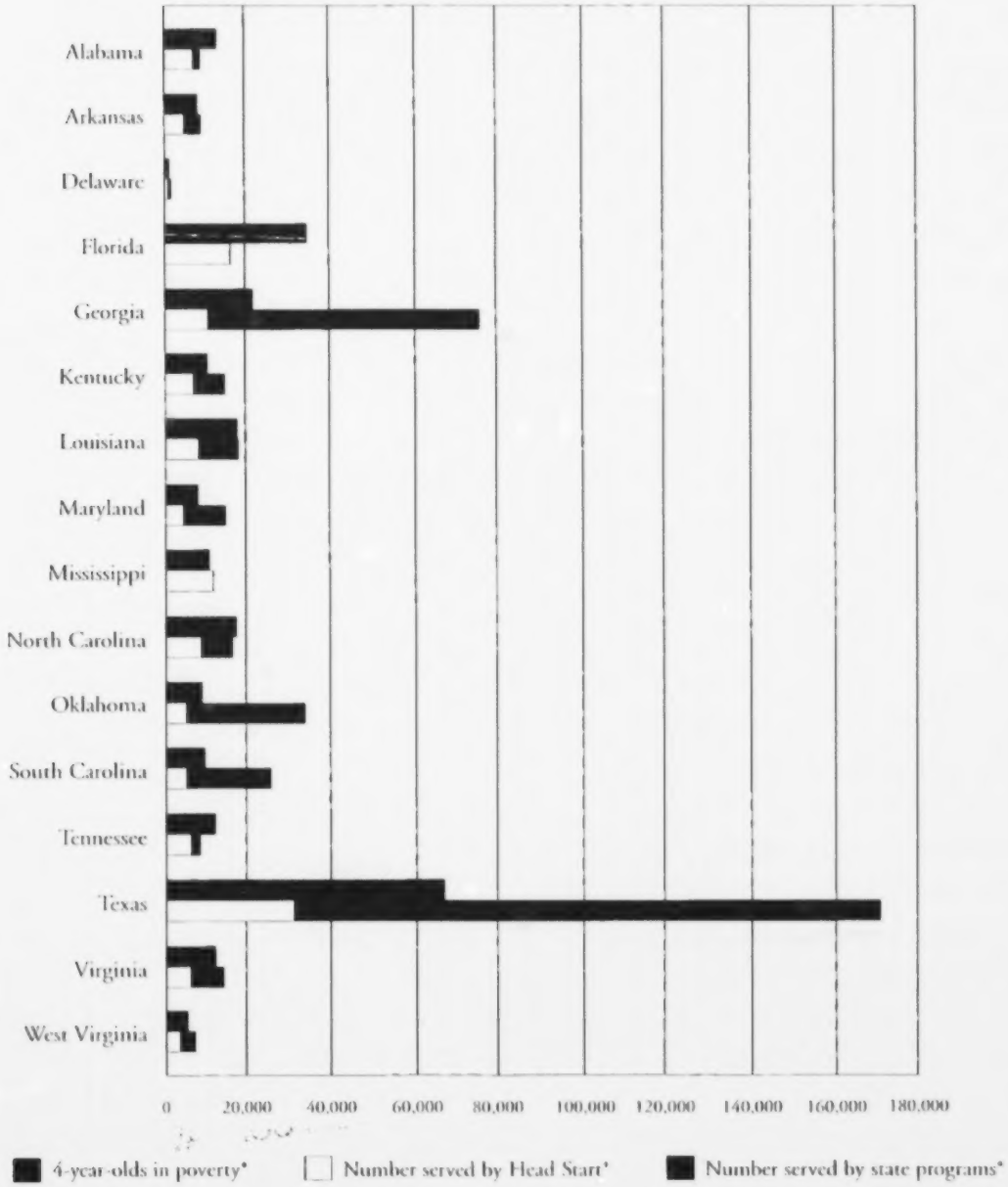
4-Year-Olds in Poverty and Total 4-Year-Olds Served by State Programs and Head Start in SREB States



* Population figures are from the 2000 census. Head Start enrollment estimates are based on 2001-2002 data. State prekindergarten figures are for 2002-2003

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, state program officials.

Note: Florida information does not include children enrolled in state prekindergarten programs because data are not available.

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The state-allocated funds do not always represent the total funding available for the operation of state prekindergarten programs. Where states require local matching funds or in-kind support, for example, those amounts are not included in the totals shown here. Where programs are operated by public schools, the schools may use some of their general operating funds to supplement state funding as needed. Some programs also may compete for and receive grant funds from other sources to enhance capacity or quality or both. Any attempt to compare costs per child using the numbers reported here, even when allowing for different hours of operation, will produce results that vary across a very wide range. It seems clear that a better understanding is needed of all the sources of support for the different state programs before conclusions can be reached that will be useful to policy-makers. A future SREB report will attempt to deal comprehensively with these financing issues.

Like most of the nation, the SREB states all are facing pressures on their budgets as a result of the current economic downturn. While prekindergarten programs have not been immune from legislative debate about possible ways to reduce state spending, none of the 15 states with programs has experienced a significant reduction in funding. The continued growth of state-funded prekindergarten despite major revenue shortfalls is testimony to the commitment of the SREB states to achieving the goal of having all children ready for first grade.

The SREB report ***Improving Children's Readiness for School: Preschool Programs Make a Difference, But Quality Counts!*** reported on studies of state prekindergarten programs in **Florida, Georgia, Maryland, South Carolina** and **Texas** that showed these programs can make a real difference in terms of children's later success in school. The recent **Delaware** study (mentioned in the accompanying program description) adds further evidence to the growing body of research showing that quality prekindergarten programs are a good investment of state resources. ***Improving Children's Readiness for School*** also includes a detailed discussion of the factors that differentiate a high-quality preschool program from a mediocre or poor one: specifically, a low student-to-teacher ratio and small class size; qualified, well-compensated teachers; a curriculum that has been proved to be effective; meaningful parent involvement; and strong health and safety standards. Another SREB report, ***Focus on Quality: Prekindergarten Programs in SREB States***, provides information on child-to-staff ratios, minimum class sizes and teacher qualifications in each program.

The state profiles that follow are not intended to be comprehensive descriptions of the programs but to provide basic information about current levels of activity and any recent or anticipated developments with significant implications for the programs. Where programs serve both 3- and 4-year olds, the total number of children served is provided, with the number of 4-year-olds in parentheses.

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Where required hours of program operation indicate "school day," the exact hours may vary somewhat but can generally be assumed to be between six and seven hours per day. Under eligible providers, the term "any qualifying organization" may refer to schools, government agencies, civic organizations and/or private providers of early care and education services.

The numbers of children served by the state programs do not include children with disabilities, who are served with individual education plans under the provisions of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). All states are required by federal law to provide services for these children, regardless of family income, while the prekindergarten programs described here represent voluntary efforts on the part of the states to help ensure that young children arrive at school ready to succeed. It is not unusual for some children with disabilities to be served in the same classrooms as those without disabilities, but the services for those children usually are paid for from IDEA funds. For the same reason, the Head Start enrollment numbers used to calculate the total number of at-risk, non-disabled children in each state served by either Head Start or a state program, as shown in the chart on page 3, have been reduced by 13 percent — the proportion of all slots nationally that were occupied by IDEA children in that year .

It can safely be assumed that every state has some local providers of early care and education services that offer high-quality prekindergarten services without any official connection with either the state program or Head Start. Including these providers in the enrollment totals for each state would present a more complete picture of the numbers of at-risk children in high-quality programs in each state. At present, however, it is not possible to accurately identify these programs or to determine their enrollments of at-risk children, but this information may become more readily available at some time in the future.

Alabama Prekindergarten Program

Year established: 2000
Target population: All 4-year-olds
2002-2003 funding: $3.2 million
Hours: 6.5 hours, 5 days per week
Children served: 1,280
Eligible providers: Any qualifying organization
Administering agency: Office of School Readiness in the Department of Children's Affairs

Notes: Funds are distributed directly to providers by competitive grants. Total funding for 2002-2003 includes $1 million from a federal Appalachian Regional Commission grant and $650,000 in unexpended TANF funds. Sources for continued funding have not yet been determined as this report goes to press.

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Arkansas Better Chance (ABC)

Year established: 1991
2002-2003 funding: $13.4 million
Children served: 7,420 (3,974)
Target population: At-risk 3- and 4-year-olds
Hours: 7.5 hours, 5 days per week
Eligible providers: Any qualifying organization
Administering agency: Department of Human Services

Notes: Overall, 40 percent of participating children are in classroom programs and 60 percent are served by HIPPY (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters) home-visiting programs. For 4-year-olds, 55 percent are in classrooms and 45 percent are in HIPPY programs. Funds are distributed directly to service providers by competitive grants. Legislation passed in 2003 established the Better Chance for School Success Program, which will expand the existing programs by targeting 3- and 4-year-olds in school districts where at least 75 percent of students score below the proficient level on state benchmark exams.

Delaware Early Childhood Assistance Program (ECAP)

Year established: 1994
2002-2003 funding: $4.5 million
Children served: 840
Target population: At-risk 4-year-olds
Hours: 4 hours, 5 days per week
Eligible providers: Any qualifying organization
Administering agency: Department of Education

Notes: This program originally was designed to supplement existing Head Start programs. The expectation was that over time the Head Start providers would expand using state funds until all eligible children were served. When the Head Start programs did not expand sufficiently, eligibility for funding was opened to schools and other types of providers in the community. Funds are distributed by competitive grants. Regardless of sponsorship, all programs are required to meet Head Start Performance Standards; Head Start programs, which are required by federal regulations to operate only four days per week, must provide five days of services for children who are supported by state funds. A longitudinal study released in 2002 found that children who had participated in the ECAP program were significantly more likely to meet or exceed standards on third-grade reading and mathematics assessments, had significantly higher grades and were less than half as likely to repeat a grade than their peers who had not attended ECAP. *(Investing in Better Outcomes: The Delaware Early Childhood Longitudinal Study,* April 2002, can be downloaded from the Delaware Department of Education Web site at www.doe.state.de.us/early_childhood.)

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Florida Prekindergarten Programs

Year established: 1978 (see notes)
Target population: At-risk 3- and 4-year-olds
2002-2003 funding: Not available
Hours: See notes
Children served: Not available
Eligible providers: Determined by each county
Administering agency: Partnership for School Readiness in the Department of Workforce Innovation

Notes: In 2002, the Florida Legislature said that decision-making about how to improve children's readiness for school should be at the local rather than the state level. Instead of allocating funds for specific state readiness initiatives, the Legislature said that all funds for categorical programs now would be given to each county as a lump sum for use according to priorities set by county school-readiness coalitions. Funding for the Prekindergarten Early Intervention Program (drawn primarily from state lottery proceeds) was included in this new system. As a result, the Early Intervention Program — which had been in existence since 1987and which funded every school district in the state to provide prekindergarten for at-risk children — officially ceased operations at the end of the 2001-2002 school year.

In 2002-2003, the first year of operation under the new system, readiness coalitions in 54 of Florida's 67 counties chose to continue funding their school-based prekindergarten programs. Because of the new procedures for setting priorities and allocating school readiness funds locally, the actual enrollments and the amounts of state funds that county partnerships have committed to prekindergarten programs in 2002-2003 are not available at this time. Some school districts have said that they may not be able to continue operating their prekindergarten programs after the current year because they are getting less funding through the county coalitions than they previously had gotten directly from the state. Under the old guidelines, programs were required to operate six hours per day, five days per week, but that requirement no longer applies under the county partnerships.

Florida also funds a prekindergarten program for 3- and 4-year-old children of migrant workers. Begun in 1978, this program continues to be funded directly by the state. In 2001-2002, the migrant prekindergarten program received $3 million in state funds and served 3,270 children. Migrant programs are required to operate six hours per day, five days per week during the school year.

In November 2002, Florida voters approved a ballot measure calling for development of a new prekindergarten program that would be open to any 4-year-old in the state. Legislation passed in early 2003 requires the state Board of Education to complete a study by October 2003 and recommend curriculum, design and standards for the new, voluntary, statewide prekindergarten program.

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Georgia 4-Year-Old Prekindergarten Program

Year established: 1992
2002-2003 funding: $253 million
Children served: 65,500
Target population: All 4-year-olds
Hours: 6.5 hours, 5 days per week
Eligible providers: Any qualifying organization
Administering agency: Office of School Readiness

Notes: The Georgia prekindergarten program began in 1992 as a pilot program serving 750 at-risk children. In 1993, a state lottery (called the Georgia Lottery for Education) was established, with proceeds dedicated to three different education efforts, including the 4-year-old program. In 1996, the program was opened to all 4-year-olds in the state, regardless of family income. The program expanded rapidly and is now the fourth-largest in the United States — after the programs in Texas, California and New York. The Georgia program serves 55 percent of all 4-year-olds in the state, ranking third in that category behind Minnesota (64 percent) and Oklahoma (60 percent). When children served by Head Start are added, the percentage of 4-year-olds served in Georgia rises to 65 percent. The program's 2002-2003 budget of $253 million is entirely from lottery proceeds. Funds are distributed directly to each individual program operator, and virtually any kind of community organization can offer a program if it can meet the state's standards for quality.

Kentucky Preschool Program

Year established: 1990
2002-2003 funding: $18.1 million
Children served: 6,900
Target population: At-risk 4-year-olds
Hours: 2.5 hours, 4 days per week
Eligible providers: Any qualifying organization
Administering agency: Department of Education

Notes: All funding goes to local school districts, which may operate programs themselves or contract them out to other qualified providers. (Previous SREB publications showed enrollment and funding for the prekindergarten program at levels twice those listed here. The earlier figures included children with disabilities, whom all states are required to serve under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.)

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Louisiana Prekindergarten Programs

Year established: 1985 (see notes)
2002-2003 funding: $43.8 million
Children served: 9,250
Target population: All 4-year-olds
Hours: School day, 5 days per week
Eligible providers: Public and private schools
Administering agencies: Department of Education and Governor's Office

Notes: Figures are totals for three state programs. Two of these — the original program, started in 1985 and now called Starting Points, and the newer LA4 program — together serve approximately 8,250 children in local programs offered by public schools; both programs are administered by the state Department of Education. The third state program — Nonpublic Schools Early Childhood Development (NCESD) — is administered by the Governor's Office of Community Programs and serves approximately 1,000 children in local programs offered by private and parochial schools. The $43.8 million allocated to the program includes $35 million in unexpended federal TANF funds, the long-term availability of which is uncertain.

Maryland Extended Elementary Education Program

Year established: 1979
2002-2003 funding: $19.3 million
Children served: 9,974
Target population: At-risk 4-year-olds
Hours: 2.5 hours, 5 days per week
Eligible providers: Public schools
Administering agency: Department of Education

Notes: Funds are distributed to local school districts, which may operate the prekindergarten programs themselves or contract with other providers in the community to provide the services. The Maryland Legislature has set a goal of making quality prekindergarten services available to every at-risk child in the state by 2007-2008. It is anticipated that schools will turn increasingly to the option of contracting for services as they strive to reach that goal.

Mississippi

Notes: Mississippi does not currently have a state-funded prekindergarten program. However, legislation enacted in 2003 calls for statewide studies of the quality and availability of public and private prekindergarten programs in the state and the feasibility of starting a state-funded prekindergarten program, with reports to be submitted to the Legislature by January 2004. Head Start programs in Mississippi serve a higher percentage of eligible children than in any other state in the nation.

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North Carolina More at Four Prekindergarten Program

Year established: 2001
Target population: At-risk 4-year-olds
2002-2003 funding: $36 million
Hours: School day, 5 days per week
Children served: 7,621
Eligible providers: Any qualifying organization
Administering agencies: Department of Human Services and the Governor's Office, in collaboration with the Department of Public Instruction

Notes: The More at Four program is the first true prekindergarten program funded by the state of North Carolina. The widely publicized Smart Start program, begun in 1993, is also a school readiness program, but it provides state funds — $200 million in 2002-2003 — to county coalitions to use to provide family support services and improve the availability and quality of child care. More at Four funds are distributed to county-level administering agencies, which are guided by planning teams that determine where slots will be placed. Currently, the More at Four administering agencies are about evenly split between public schools and Smart Start coalitions. Each site is expected to provide a local contribution to supplement state funds, but the required amount of that contribution is not specified in the enabling legislation. The 2002-2003 funding is for 7,621 children. However, only 5,400 slots were filled as of the end of April 2003: There were implementation challenges, and the Legislature did not pass the state budget until after the start of the school year. The number of children enrolled is increasing steadily.

Oklahoma Early Childhood 4-Year-Old Program

Year established: 1980
Target population: All 4-year-olds
2002-2003 funding: $64.1 million
Hours: 2.5 or 6 hours, 5 days per week
Children served: 28,060
Eligible providers: Any qualifying organization
Administering agency: Department of Education

Notes: After 18 years as a program aimed at helping at-risk children be better prepared for school, the Oklahoma program was opened to all 4-year-olds in 1999. The program now serves 60 percent of all 4-year-olds in the state, second in the United States to the program in Minnesota (which serves 64 percent). When children served by Head Start are added, the percentage of 4-year-olds served rises to 74 percent. Funding is determined by a formula based on the number of children served and whether they are in half- or full-day programs. Funds are distributed to school districts, which may offer programs directly or by contract with other community organizations. In addition to the 4-year-old program, Oklahoma provides approximately $4 million per year to supplement Head Start programs in the state.

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These funds, which are administered by the state Department of Commerce, are used for a variety of purposes, including serving additional children and providing extended hours at no cost to parents. The number of additional children served is relatively small — no more than a few hundred — and difficult to determine precisely. The 2003 Legislature created The Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness Board to set accountability standards for all state early-childhood programs, including the prekindergarten program, and to coordinate public and private funds.

South Carolina Early Childhood Program

Year established: 1984
Target population: At-risk 4 year-olds
2002-2003 funding: $27 million
Hours: 2.5 hours, 5 days per week
Children served: 19,500
Eligible providers: Public schools
Administering agency: Department of Education

Notes: Funds are distributed to each school district based on the number of first-graders in that district whose scores on the state's annual first-grade readiness assessment indicate they are "not ready." An option for schools to contract for services with other community organizations has never been exercised.

Tennessee Early Childhood Education Pilot Program

Year established: 1998
Target population: At-risk 3- and 4-year-olds
2002-2003 funding: $15 million
Hours: 5.5 hours, 5 days per week
Children served: 3,000 (2,100)
Eligible providers: Any nonprofit organization
Administering agency: Department of Education

Notes: Two-thirds of the 2002-2003 funds — $9 million — are from unexpended federal TANF funds that are not expected to be available beyond the current year. Funds are distributed directly to providers by competitive grants.

Texas Public School Prekindergarten

Year established: 1984
Target population: At-risk 3- and 4-year-olds
2001-2002 funding: $322 million
Hours: 3 hours, 5 days per week
2002-2003 Children served: 153,568 (139,709)
Eligible providers: Public school districts
Administering agency: Department of Education

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Notes: Funds are distributed on the basis of children served, and 2002-2003 figures will not be available until fall 2003. Priority for service is given to 4-year-olds, and school districts may choose not to serve 3-year-olds. Schools have the option of contracting for services with other community organizations, but relatively few have done so. Additional state funding is available through a grant process for programs that wish to expand to full-day prekindergarten. This is the largest prekindergarten program in the United States in the number of children served; in the percentage of all 4-year-olds served (43 percent), it ranks fourth — behind Minnesota, Oklahoma and Georgia.

Virginia Preschool Initiative

Year established: 1995
Target population: At-risk 4-year-olds
2002-2003 funding: $23.5 million
Hours: School day, 5 days per week
Children served: 7,300
Eligible providers: Schools or local governments
Administering agency: Department of Education

Notes: Funding is determined by a population-based formula. Total annual funding historically has been at a level intended to serve all eligible children statewide, including those in localities that choose not to participate in the program. The actual level of funding for 2002-2003 is $18.1 million. Funding goes to local school districts or local governments, which may operate programs themselves or contract for services with other qualified providers.

West Virginia Pre-K System

Year established: 2002
Target population: All 3- and 4-year-olds
2002-2003 funding: $19.3 million
Hours: 3.5 hours or school day, 3 days per week
Children served: 5,225 (4,185)
Eligible providers: Public schools
Administering agency: Department of Education

Notes: The 2002 legislation formalized a system, in existence since the mid-1980s, whereby school districts that are experiencing declining enrollment may establish prekindergarten programs and receive funding for those children through the regular school formula. Ultimately, all school districts, including those that are not losing enrollment, will be expected to establish prekindergarten programs. The legislation mandates that by the 2012-2013 school year, school-based prekindergarten programs should be available for all 4-year old children whose parents wish to enroll them. After 2003-2004, state-funded programs will no longer enroll 3-year-olds.

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Goals for Education

1. All children are ready for the first grade.
2. Achievement in the early grades for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed.
3. Achievement in the middle grades for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed.
4. All young adults have a high school diploma — or, if not, pass the GED tests.
5. All recent high school graduates have solid academic preparation and are ready for postsecondary education and a career.
6. Adults who are not high school graduates participate in literacy and job-skills training and further education.
7. The percentage of adults who earn postsecondary degrees or technical certificates exceeds national averages.
8. Every school has higher student performance and meets state academic standards for all students each year.
9. Every school has leadership that results in improved student performance — and leadership begins with an effective school principal.
10. Every student is taught by qualified teachers.
11. The quality of colleges and universities is regularly assessed and funding is targeted to quality, efficiency and state needs.
12. The state places a high priority on an education *system* of schools, colleges and universities that is accountable.

The Southern Regional Education Board established these new goals in 2002. They are built on the groundbreaking education goals SREB adopted in 1988 and on a decade-long effort to promote actions and measure progress. The new goals raise further the sights of the 16 SREB states and challenge them to lead the nation.

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